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# NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION: ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF NATIONAL NAMES AUTHORITIES

## The legal status of official endonyms

Submitted by Israel**

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The Government Names Commission, national authority on geographical names in Israel, was set up by decree of the Israeli Government in 1951. This was the first time that a legally constituted body on geographical names had been set up in the Holy Land. Affiliated to the office of the Prime Minister, its members are nominated ad personam, and the nominations must be signed by the Clerk-General of the Government and be published in the government Gazette. Members are appointed - normally at the recommendation of the chairman - on a strictly professional and non-political basis. The terms of reference, published in the government Gazette in 1951, make the Commission the sole authority on geographical names in Israel. In order to acquire not only standardized but also official status, such names must be ratified by the Government Names Commission. Furthermore, the decree stipulates that names ratified by the Commission are binding on all institutions of the Government of Israel. Thus, the Postal Authority of the Ministry of Communications must use these names and no others on cancelling stamps and in telephone directories; the Ministry of the Interior must use them in their cadastral operations and plans; the Public Works Department has to indicate them on official road signs; and the Central Bureau of Statistics must use them in its population census activities and in lists of cities, townships and villages. Above all, names conferred or ratified by the Government Names Commission must be, and are used in all maps produced by the Survey of Israel, the national surveying and mapping authority. The names are thus uniform in documents of all institutions and authorities mentioned above. This applies not only to populated places, but also to names of natural features and historical or archaeological sites.

The Government Names Commission is composed of three Subcommissions. These are the Subcommission on Names of Populated Places, the Subcommission on Geographical Names (these being, in the present context, names of natural and other physical features); and the Subcommission on Historical Names. A name can be proposed by any private or public body and be brought before one of the Subcommissions. It can also be proposed by a Subcommission or by one of its members. If a name is approved by the appropriate Subcommission it is brought before the plenum of the Government Names Commission which convenes on the average three times a year. Ratification by the plenum and publication in its records confer official status to the name.

A private person or a public body can also appeal against an officially ratified name. The appeal is heard in the first instance by the respective Subcommission and, if upheld, must be heard by the plenum. If accepted, a new name can then be proposed, but this must again be ratified by the Commission.

Since a decision by the Government Names Commission is legally binding, an appeal against its decision must be made before a court of law. Only in three cases in the past 41 years have appeals reached the courts. In two of these, one before a district court and the other before the Supreme Court, was the appeal rejected. Only in one case, concerning the name Ir Ovot (the biblical Ir Oboth) was the appeal upheld, though for purely legalistic reasons not stemming from the name itself. However, in handing down judgement, the Court explicitly upheld the authority of the Government Names Commission to

judgement, the Court explicitly upheld the authority of the Government Names Commission to confer names and stressed its professional-scientific principles and its non-partisan composition.

Whereas there is marked uniformity in the use of standardized name forms in Israel, the same cannot be said for the romanization of these endonyms. The official system of transliteration from Hebrew into roman script was adopted by the Knesset (Parliament) in 1956 and by the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1977. This system, too, is binding on government institutions and used by all authorities mentioned above in connection with geographical names in Israel, and particularly in maps. However, various other systems are being used by numerous private and even public bodies. This fact is a result of the different linguistic backgrounds of the bodies employing the names, most often in transcription and not in transliteration. Thus, touristic texts (e.g. brochures, guidebooks etc.), in the different languages spoken by tourists, make use of separate transcriptions into these languages. Although efforts are made to support and reinforce the use of the official romanization system, it is conceivable that in the future some modifications will be introduced in order to make this system more user-friendly to a wider segment of the roman script-reading population - chiefly tourists. At present, however, the official romanization system remains unchanged.

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